

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 286 877

SP 029 454

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 TITLE Problems in Defending the Theoretical Dimension in Teacher Education.
 PUB DATE Nov 86
 NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the American Educational Studies Association Convention (Pittsburgh, PA, October 27-November 1, 1986).
 PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (120) -- Information Analyses (070)
 EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
 DESCRIPTORS *Foundations of Education; Higher Education; Preservice Teacher Education; *Relevance (Education); *Teacher Education Curriculum; Teaching Experience; *Theory Practice Relationship

ABSTRACT

Although theory is the backbone of foundations of education curriculum in teacher education, many students and teacher educators do not recognize its importance, particularly in the light of the increasing trend toward more practical experiences at the expense of such courses. The imitative and experiential approach to teaching, as well as the social functionalist perspective, limit the role of theory in educational decision making. Both, in the end, set limits on the professional aspects of the teaching-learning experience, stressing instead the craft-like features of teaching. (CB)

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ED286877

PROBLEMS IN DEFENDING THE THEORETICAL
DEMINSION IN TEACHER EDUCATION

by

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Presented as part of a panel at AESA Convention, Pittsburgh, PA,
October 27 - November 1, 1986

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Defending the place of theory in teacher education programs would appear to be, at least for foundations faculty, defending the obvious. It would be similar to Jerry Falwell defending his stance on abortion or school prayer before the congregation of the faithful. The conclusions are well known even before the address is given. Aside from encouraging the saints to fight the good fight, the address provides few new ideas. At best one hopes to gain new courage, perhaps a few additional rounds of ammunition, in the fight against sinners, barbarians, and bureaucrats.

Theory is the backbone, so to speak, of our discipline - the foundations. Not surprisingly we complain when the number of foundations courses - which we proudly depict as theoretical - are decreased to make room for such practical courses as audio visual aids, methods, or lab and field experience. After all, any self respecting intellectual should recognize the shallowness of the pursuit of a "how to" approach in education. What more can one expect of educational technicians and bureaucrats who function best when breaking education down into discrete skills and counting paper clips. Cast in this perspective, the answer is self evident. Theory has a place in teacher education, all self respecting scholars should recognize the obvious.

But why don't they? Even more importantly, why don't many of our students and teachers recognize this? Doran Christensen has evidence that at least some teachers recognize the need for the theoretical dimension including the need for courses in

history and philosophy of education. Yet many of our students and many teachers, if Dan Lortie is correct, do not. Perhaps what we need is a more charismatic teacher, one who can make history and philosophy of education come alive. But that in itself would not convince the students of the need for a theoretical dimension in teacher education. The purpose of my talk is to shift the focus away from the need for to two problems facing a theory-based component in teacher education programs.

One problem is the power which the past and experience holds over teacher. Dan Lortie, in School Teacher: A Sociological Perspective argues that what students learn about teaching is intuitive and imitative rather than explicit and analytical. Their educational "theory" is heavily tied to individual personalities. Teachers, in his study, seemed to place events preceding formal preparation for and entry into teaching in a continuous framework. They did not contrast their early perceptions of teachers which they had encountered as students at the pre-college level with more sophisticated viewpoints gained as a result of their professional training. Their professional training "did not serve as 'dramatic watersheds' separating the perceptions of naive laymen from later judgements by knowing professionals." (Lortie, pp. 65-66.) This may be due in part to the structuring of most pre-service programs. The power of experience is reinforced by the culminating field experience called student teaching. Here the imitative rather than a theoretical approach seems to be the more powerful. Not surprisingly, many teachers, as Sharon Nemser points out, judge their pre-service teacher education program successful to the

extent to which it provides them with technical knowledge. What they request is training in skills in order to carry out more successfully their supervisor's approach to teaching.

Relying solely on experience has its obvious pitfalls. As critics such as Nemser and Lortie have pointed out, teachers need to go beyond merely relying upon to also examining their past. An imitative approach based solely upon experience coupled with skilled-type courses do not enable prospective teachers to break beyond, what Nemser calls the "excessive realism," where teachers equate "what is possible" with "what is."

Presumably, here is a role for foundations courses, to free students from this excessive realism. But as Bruce Joyce reminds us, the culminating experience for most education majors is the student teaching experience set up as "an apprenticeship system designed to socialize the young teachers into the practice of the older ones." He also observes,

no more effective method has
ever been devised for preventing
change in a social institution
than to apprentice the novice to
the elder (Joyce, 116)

Is there a way for the theoretical dimension to compete with the experiential in teacher education? One suggested solution has been to tie field experiences to specific courses, including foundations courses. Here would be one way to get beyond the criticism that theory courses are too idealistic, filled with lofty goals but without suggested methods of reaching the goal. However, if the increased field experiences are not properly monitored and supervised, they may well merely reinforce the

experiential and imitative at the expense of the theoretical in teacher education.

Another problem in defending the place of theory in teacher education has been the increased tendency to define education in social functionalist terms. In a perspective article, "Inquiry and Social Function: Two Views of Educational Practice and Policy," J. David Greenstone and Paul Peterson analyze two, often conflicting, models of schooling. The one, the inquiry perspective, sees the task of the schools to be one of cultivating reason for its own sake. Advocates of this model define schooling primarily as an interaction between students and teachers. They argue that given the differences between students and classes, no one educational methodology or technology can adequately define teaching. Consequently, decision making must be left in the hands of teachers who need to be creative problem solvers. The social functionalist perspective, on the other hand, views education as a means to an end. The end may be economic, as emphasized in the industrial model or group interests and equity as emphasized during the 1960s and 1970s. Advocates of the social functionalist perspective seek to change teacher behavior by changing the allocation of resources, discovering one best teaching methodology, and centralized control. They call for more skilled teachers in carrying out society's predetermined policies.

Several examples could be cited here. At the state level is Tennessee's recent educational reform legislation based, in part, on the industrial model of education. Educational reform was

deemed essential for Tennessee to compete in a high tech society. Educational reform necessitated changing teachers' behaviors which could best be done through merit pay. The problem now was one of finding an objective, universal method of evaluation. The result was the adoption of one master teaching plan, the TIMS model. At the federal level two examples could be cited. One is the passage of PL 94-142. Although few might disagree with its overall goal, equity for the handicapped, one must recognize its prescriptive nature which limits the range of professional decision making for educators. Another is the proliferation of teacher proof materials and programs at the national levels in math, science, and social science since 1960. Designed to promote national goals and interests these programs brought with them, as J. Myran Atkins points out, a new group of specialists including "text writer, subject matter expert, test developer, classroom manager, program evaluator, curriculum planner." (Atkins, p. 95). In the process the teacher's role changed. No longer were the teachers expected to have input in designing a curriculum and selecting teaching methods to suit their interests. The whole process, Atkins warns,

may have contributed to
'deskilling' and 'deprofessionalizing.'
Versality is associated with
autonomy; autonomy is unnecessary if
the act of teaching is not seen as
requiring skilled selection from a
broad repertoire of possible actions.
The craft like elements of teaching
are thereby emphasized, leading to
a loss of opportunities for
professional initiative.
(Atkins, p. 95)

The point here is not divide the education into two camps with inquiry representing virtue and social functions evil. Many AESA members have supported the drive for equity including the intrusion of the federal government into education on behalf of minorities and the handicapped. The problem for foundations faculty, however, is to convince educational administrators that theory has a place in the educational arena where options are becoming increasingly limited and where policies and even methodologies are increasingly prescribed at the federal and state levels. Who can blame a school superintendent when facing a government audit, a lawsuit from a parent of a handicapped child, or examining the latest printout of students' performance on a state-wide proficiency test for wishing that his teachers would have been more skilled in their craft. After all, few administrators ever face a lawsuit because their teachers have not taught students to love knowledge for its own sake.

The argument presented in this paper is that the imitative and experiential approach to teaching as well as the social functionalist perspective limit the role of theory in educational decision making. Both, in the end, set limits on the professional aspects of the teaching-learning experience, stressing instead the craft-like features. What counts, in the end is the ability to demonstrate specific skills.

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